



THE GREAT REVOLT

PAUL DOWSWELL

BLOOMSBURY



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CHAPTER ONE

June 1, 1381

Matilda Rolfe shivered in her woollen blankets and watched the lightning flash in the reflections of the puddles on the mud floor of her hut. Her straw mattress was still slightly damp from the last time they'd had a storm, and she had moved her bedding to the driest part of the hut, where the thatched roof was most secure. Outside the rain poured down in sheets and the trees behind the house rattled and rustled in the fierce wind. The smell of wet cob – that mixture of straw, soil and animal droppings that made up the walls – lodged in her nostrils.

Matilda had put on all her clothes and she was still cold. Last year they had had two old dogs and they loved to snuggle up with her at night and keep her warm. But Sturdy and Holdfast had both died over the winter. When a neighbour's dog had had a litter in the spring Matilda had asked if they could have a couple, but her father, Thomas, had told her sadly they could not afford to feed them. Maybe next year they would have dogs again.

Earlier in the night, Thomas had given her his spare blanket. She had been half awake when he had draped it over her, whispering, 'You keep warm, Tilda,' and now she could hear him snoring away behind the wicker partition on the other side of the hut. She felt a twinge of guilt, letting him give her that blanket, but he was a tough old boar and the cold and stormy night was not preventing him from sleeping.

Lightning flashed again, illuminating the outlines of the glassless windows and their wooden baffles, and lighting up those puddles. The water on the floor was not creeping any closer. Reassured that she was not in danger of waking under a stream of rainwater, Tilda began to drift off to sleep. Another

great gust of wind shook the hut and she started awake again, wondering why God was so angry to visit them with a storm like this. Was it their sinful ways? She and Thomas lived a blameless life, working for the lord of the manor in his fields, and tending to their own needs on the little strip of land he let them farm.

People called them serfs, or villeins, and they were tied to their lord and their village. Everyone else around them was the same. Everyone went to church and there was no whiff of witchcraft among the humble folk of Aylesford village. So maybe it was their betters who had aroused the wrath of God?

Three months ago an extraordinary man of God had visited the village and preached to them all on the green. John Ball had said something she had not been able to forget:

*When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?*

She loved that – she and her father delved the land – turning and tending to the soil in the fields. And Tilda's mother, Mary, had been a spinner of

flax before she died giving birth to a stillborn little sister. Tilda could picture her mother now, sitting by the fire with her wheel and spindle. And what Ball said was true. The world God created in the Garden of Eden wasn't the world they lived in. They were slaves to the lords and ladies who treated common people like them with contempt. Their local lord, William Laybourne, was hated by most of the villagers she knew – apart from her neighbours, Walter and Elspeth Cooper, who no one trusted.

A few days after he had visited the village, John Ball had been arrested. They heard he was held in Maidstone Gaol. Tilda felt indignant about that. She was convinced that what he'd said was plainly true. Not that her father agreed with her. He thought they ought to keep their heads down and tug their forelocks to the lord of the manor, and anyone else who served the king. Tilda held her tongue. She loved her father and did not want to make him angry. He said talk like that was rebellious, traitorous even. And besides, there were terrible punishments for those who spoke against the rulers of the land.

Tilda had seen what happened to traitors when she was barely ten years old. Four years earlier,

two men from Aylesford were said to have been spying for the French. And the way they were dealt with had made Tilda's stomach churn in leaden fear. The wretches were dragged through the main street by a horse, then taken to the scaffold and hanged until near death. Then their breeches were pulled down and they were castrated. That was barely the start of it. The hangman had bought some hideous spooling device and cut the men in the innards, pulling out their guts from their insides. They both died sometime during that hideous ordeal and even in death their indignity was not yet over. Their lifeless bodies were beheaded, and then cut into four pieces. The whole village had been made to watch this disgusting spectacle. Four years on, the memory of it, and the screams of the victims, still haunted her. She wondered whether they would do that to a girl like her, or whether it was just men who had to endure such dreadful tribulations.

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Sometime during the night the storm subsided and Tilda slept. She woke to see her father standing over her.

‘It’s daybreak, my dearing,’ he said softly. ‘Here’s some porridge to start your day.’ A wooden bowl and a small jug of milk lay by the side of her mattress.

‘What a night,’ said Tilda, gathering her curly thatch of black hair to tie behind her head with a leather thong. The air was chilly and she was reluctant to stir from the meagre warmth of her bed.

‘Coopers lost half their roof,’ said Thomas, trying to sound nonchalant about it. But Tilda could tell he was pleased.

‘Ours just about stayed put. Only a bit of water come through,’ said Tilda, spooning in a mouthful of warming porridge.

Thomas shook his head. ‘This old hut’s only got another year in it, before it rots around us. We need to talk to Laybourne about finding somewhere else to live.’

Tilda frowned. ‘He’ll probably just tell us we can move in with the pigs in the sty,’ she said. Then she smiled. ‘Actually, they live in a little stone shelter with a nice timber roof, so they’re better off than us!’

‘Not seen a storm like this since I was a child,’ said Thomas, anxious to change the subject. Tilda knew he didn’t like her to be ‘disrespectful’. But she couldn’t help herself.

‘We had one like that just before the plague arrived in the village,’ Thomas went on. ‘God has ways of warning his flock...’ He trailed off, a look of bleak concern flashing across his face. Tilda felt a bolt of fear. She had heard enough tales about the plague to know it was the worst thing that could happen to her world.

Thomas changed his tune. ‘Still, storm’s passed now and the sun is shining,’ he said. ‘Look, here’s Catherine.’ A small red squirrel had appeared beside Tilda’s bed. It quickly hopped on to her shoulder and she put down her bowl to fuss it. ‘Don’t let your breakfast go cold,’ he said and got up to tend to his chores. As he left the room he said, ‘We’re harrowing the strip by Lord’s Field this morning. Be sure to bring your sling.’

Tilda nodded. She resented having to work for the lord of the manor, especially for the tiny wage he paid them. There he was, swanning around in a

hat beaded with pearls and a red velvet jacket, and the rest of them in rags, having to wear everything they owned to keep warm at night.

‘It’ll never do,’ she said softly to Catherine, stroking the side of her head. ‘One day, we shall leave this wretched life behind, and we’ll take you with us, Your Highness.’

Catherine gave a long trill, the sort of noise she made when she was happy, and Tilda reached under her bed to give her a cob nut. She loved the way the squirrel stood upright and clasped food in its front paws to eat it. Tilda called her Catherine, a royal name, because she treated her like a princess.

‘You, I don’t mind looking after, you love me back,’ she whispered. ‘But Lord William Laybourne, I could do without helping him at all. And his stuck-up son...’

Breakfast done, Tilda and Thomas walked across the common to collect their horse, Brownie, and his harrow. The air was fresh and breezy and all around there was evidence of the damage the storm had wreaked, in fallen trees and fences, and battered buildings.

Tilda thought of her father's warning. 'Do you think the plague is coming back?' she asked.

Thomas looked uncertain. 'It's returned before, but never as bad as when I was a boy. That was horrible, Tilda. I hope you never see anything like that. People covered in swellings as large as eggs, oozing blood and pus. It makes me sick to think of it. And they died in a day. We lost over half the village in a few weeks.'

Tilda had heard these stories many times. She put an arm round him, nestling under his shoulder. 'But not you and Mum,' she said.

Thomas put his brave face on. 'Might not be plague that's coming,' he said. 'Might be something else. Who knows what God has in store for his flock.'

CHAPTER TWO

Brownie lived in a little wooden stable next to Lord's Wood and the biggest field on the estate. The harrow he would pull had been leaning against the stable but had fallen over in the storm. Thomas and Tilda picked it up together. The heavy wooden beams and great iron nails were certainly more than Tilda could pick up on her own.

‘We shouldn’t let that get too wet,’ said Thomas. ‘Wood’ll go rotten and the nails’ll rust. We should have put it inside yesterday afternoon.’

Lord Laybourne called from a distance. ‘You, Rolfe. I want a word.’

‘What’s this about?’ muttered Tilda.

‘I can guess,’ said Thomas, looking at the harrow.

But before the lord could get any closer, he was surrounded by several irate villagers. He looked distracted and his hand went instinctively to the hilt of his sword. Even from a distance Tilda could sense his disdain – he had the expression and manner of a man in the presence of a powerfully unpleasant smell. Maybe he was, thought Tilda with a smile. Some of the villeins still thought a hearty smell let the world know they were bursting with manly vigour. How such men thought this would make them attractive to women was beyond her understanding. She was grateful her father did not cling to that old-fashioned idea.

They walked forward, as angry words drifted towards them in the light wind. Laybourne was almost a head taller than the peasants around him, but he was a lean and wiry man, and probably no match for a thickset peasant intent on doing him harm. But the closer they got the more it became clear that the men who surrounded him were angry about something else and were expecting him to help them.

Eustace Fogg, who lived across the village from the Rolfes, was in a desperate state. ‘You must help, my lord, I beg you. My brother, Peter of Larkfield, has been arrested.’

‘I’m sure for good reason,’ said Laybourne sharply.

‘No, my lord, his daughter was assaulted by a tax collector.’

Laybourne’s face remained impassive. ‘The collectors have too much work to do, surely? They would not have time to assault the young women of the parish.’

Fogg tried to contain his anger. ‘My lord, the collectors demanded a whole twelve pence from everyone in the village over the age of fifteen.’

‘I know,’ said Laybourne. He sounded weary. ‘I was instructed by the county constable to levy such a charge. Those men work directly for me.’

‘But my lord...’ Fogg had gone red in the face with anger. ‘This collector, he told Peter’s daughter she would have to pay. She’s only thirteen. The lecherous goat said he did not believe her and pulled up her gown to her chest. He made her naked

for all the world to see...' The others around them stood silent in shock. Laybourne tried to arrange his face into an expression of concern. 'And this man leered at her and declared to her father that *he* was obviously a liar and *she* was obviously a fine young woman and old enough for sure to pay the tax.'

Laybourne shook his head and spoke firmly. Tilda thought his was a tone of voice an adult would use to speak to a stubborn child. 'The collectors are charged by the king to raise revenue for the crown. There is a war with France to be paid for. Money does not grow on a magic money tree. How would this man know your brother was not lying about his daughter's age?'

Fogg could sense he had no chance of winning this argument. He was clearly at a loss for what to say next.

Another man spoke for him. 'My lord, Peter Fogg was so enraged at the collector's lechery, he grabbed a shovel and split the man's head open.'

'And did the collector die of his wound?' asked Laybourne. This time, he sounded concerned.

The man nodded.

'Then Fogg will hang within a week.'

The pronouncement put an end to the meeting. Laybourne strode away, fixing Tilda and Thomas with a stern eye. 'You left the harrow out last night. If you do it again you will be fined a week's wages.'

Thomas lowered his eyes in shame. 'Yes, my lord. It was my fault.' Tilda had forgotten to do it. Her father was protecting her.

Laybourne's eye alighted on Tilda. He gave her a crooked smile. 'And how old are you, young woman? Is anyone going to be lifting your gown up to check on your age?'

Thomas stood before him, his meekness gone.

'My daughter is only fourteen, my lord,' he said firmly.

Laybourne shrugged. 'I won't tell you again about the harrow.' Then he turned around and sauntered back to the manor house with a slate roof, where the Rolfes both noticed there were four chimneys billowing smoke from fires to ward off the late spring chill.

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Eustace Fogg looked like he had seen a ghost. 'I would have acted the same if that man had done that to my daughter.'

Thomas Rolfe put a hand on his shoulder. 'Who knows what a man will do in the heat of anger,' he said. 'I am sorry your brother is in such deep trouble.'

Fogg's voice hardened. 'Storm like last night always means trouble. Who knows what's coming our way?'

Alone now, Tilda and Thomas led Brownie out of his stable and let him graze on the thick grass. They walked the harrow clumsily out to the side of the field and prepared the leather harnesses. 'This one's only got a few more days in it,' said Tilda, holding up a worn length.

Thomas called Brownie over with a carrot he produced from his tunic. As the horse gobbled away, Tilda quickly attached his harness to the harrow. They were about to set off to till the field when another distraction overtook them. Hugh Godfrey, one of Laybourne's men, was hailing them.

'Rolfe, tax collectors will be here tomorrow,' he said. 'A shilling from everyone over fifteen.' He turned to Tilda and smiled. 'You should be all right,' he said kindly. 'You were baptised here weren't you? Ask them to check the parish records

if they query your age.’ Then he hared off, looking for other farm labourers to tell.

‘We’re paying for you, Tilda. I’m not having no grubby collector lifting up your gown.’

‘Anyone who does that to me will have his nose broken,’ said Tilda.

‘Attacking a tax collector can have serious consequences, my dearing. You might even be accused of treason.’

Tilda was outraged. ‘But it’s a whole week’s wages, Father. We have barely enough to eat. And almost no fuel for our fire.’

‘We’ll manage,’ said Thomas. And that was the end of that discussion.

He left Tilda to her thoughts. She shrugged. A week’s wages for an unexpected poll tax was something that made her angry but it wasn’t going to kill them. If the storm was a warning, then surely God had something far worse than that up his sleeve.

*

That night, Tilda lay in her bed and pondered on the injustices of the world. This was their lot. Laybourne owned them, like he owned the

buildings and the land in and around the village, and he could sell them like cattle. When she first discovered this, when her father had told her about it one evening, she had been outraged.

Funnily enough, Thomas didn't seem to mind. 'Tilda, my dearing, we get a place to live and we get land to work on and grow our food. What else can we do? We cannot read and write; we can only work the land. God has given us a good life. Or at least a life we can bear.'

'We can run away, Father,' she had said.

Thomas had smiled sadly. 'We haven't got much in this world have we, sweet Matilda?' he said, sweeping his arm about the sparse interior of their hut. 'But if we ran away we'd have absolutely nothing. We have friends around us, we're born to work the soil and we'll live and die as villeins. It's God's will. We can't go against it.'

Even as a twelve-year-old hearing this for the first time, Tilda felt a sense of burning injustice in her father's words. But she could see the sense in them too. What else could they do?

'But what about Uncle John?' she had said. Thomas had mentioned she had an uncle who lived

in London. He had escaped from the village before she was born.

‘Yes, he was lucky. He made use of his skill with wood. He became a carpenter and house-builder,’ said Thomas. ‘And it’s true. If you can live in a city for a year and a day then you are free of the bond that ties you to the lord of the manor.’

‘Why can’t we do that, Father?’ said Tilda.

Thomas just shook his head. He wasn’t even angry. ‘Because I like my village and I like my neighbours and I like the countryside. Big towns are places where everyone lives on top of everyone else, and there is pestilence, and you can’t get the smell of dung out of your nostrils. Tilda, let’s talk no more about this. The evils of the city are far greater than the evils of our servitude to Lord Laybourne.’

So Tilda never raised the subject again, but that did not stop her thinking about it. Sometimes she would fantasize about being a travelling performer – a juggler or an acrobat. She wondered if she could create an act using her skills with a slingshot – but she quickly realised that wasn’t something that would enthrall people in a street circus and get

them to part with money. She wondered too about playing a musical instrument. From time to time, wandering minstrels had visited Aylesford and the sound they made always enchanted her. But she had no idea how much a hurdy-gurdy or a crumhorn cost and didn't have the first idea how she would go about learning to play such a thing. But people told her she had a good singing voice. Maybe she could use that?

The truth was, there was very little she could do that offered her a better life than the one that was mapped out before her. Even if she had been born a boy, the choices were still very limited. One older boy from the village, she remembered, had run away to Rochester to work on the fishing boats. That sounded better than what she had to look forward to here. But no one would allow a girl to become a fisherman – it was bad luck to have women on board a boat, she was told. Tilda hated all that. 'Women are the ruin of mankind,' she was always being told. They couldn't do a thing right in the eyes of some men. In church she had to listen to the story of Genesis and how Eve had tempted Adam with the apple.

Tilda had begun to doubt those stories and could see how they were useful in keeping the villeins in their place. But she dare not share her thoughts. It was too dangerous. Heretics would be sent to hell and Tilda did not want to burn in a lake of fire for all eternity. She didn't want her friends and neighbours to shun her either, and that's what would happen if she started to argue with their local priest on a Sunday morning.

Even if she did run away to Rochester, her job would be to wait for the men to return from the sea and then spend the day gutting fish. It was a dreary prospect. Mind you, although plenty drowned on fishing boats no one ever died gutting fish, unless they got into an argument with another fish-gutter that ended in a knife fight.

In her wilder fantasies, Tilda wished she could read and write. If she could do that, she thought, she would never be bored. The mother of her friend Cecily had been able to write. She worked in nearby Maidstone, keeping records for a local brewer who was related to Laybourne. That seemed like a nice life. They even had a book in their hut, a gift from

the brewers to their valued employee. It was full of stories about faraway lands.

When Cecily and Tilda were young, they would sit as her mother read them fantastical tales of tribes who had faces on their chests rather than heads, and trees that produced live lambs rather than fruits and seeds. To Tilda, that brown leather-bound book seemed like the most valuable thing in the world, and sometimes Cecily's mother would let her hold it. And even though those squiggly lines and circles and curves were puzzling now, one day she would learn to read, she told herself.

Tilda missed Cecily. The family had moved to Maidstone with Laybourne's blessing. One Sunday, when she had an afternoon off, she would try to find her there.